

Race and VR Service: A Perspective

by Albert Jones, Civil Rights Officer

The Boston Globe published an article entitled "Race Gap Seen in the Care of the Disabled" written by Sherwood Ross on Tuesday, October 9, 2001. The article cited a national study of 162,590 clients of the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration Program conducted by Keith Wilson, Assistant Professor of Rehabilitation Education at Pennsylvania State University. Wilson found that 3.7% of whites that apply to the VR Program are denied services compared to 5.3% of blacks. Seventy-six% of those studied were white and 22% were black. Wilson concluded that one contributing factor for the higher rejection rate was that there are few counselors and administrators who are "people of color."

Wilson went on to state that 93% of counselors classify themselves as European-American. He concluded that these counselors might be swayed by stereotypes that, in turn, influence decision-making about the ability of clients to complete tasks. According to Wilson, "racial and ethnic minorities tend to have less formal education and so perform more manual labor jobs which are associated with higher numbers of disabilities." Because of "pressure on rehabilitation counselors to get successful closures, they may work better with people with disabilities who have some work history

...the more formal education you have, the better you may look to the counselor," concludes Wilson. He went on to say, "Negative stereotypes trigger negative evaluations which may or may not be intentional."

It is interesting to note that Ross's article suggested the attitude of counselors is one of the strongest predictors of successful vocational rehabilitation outcomes. Additional information in the study also allowed us to do a limited comparative analysis of our agency versus the national average of all rehabilitation agencies found in Wilson's research. Mary Esther Rohman, Program Evaluation Specialist at the MRC, compared the variables considered by Wilson regarding ethnicity and VR outcome based on state fiscal year 2000 R-911 data. According to Rohman, the MRC does not have data on eligibility rates by race, hence we could not compare the rejection rate, however, she did find that VR outcome was ultimately related to ethnicity.

In terms of years of education, Rohman reports that whites had a slightly higher average, 12.4 years, compared to 11.8 years for Blacks and 10.9 years for Hispanics. She further concluded that whites and individuals from other ethnic backgrounds tend to enter the VR system with the same level of experience, but that Blacks were more likely than other ethnic groups to receive college or business education services.